

*'The Visions of Apa Shenute of Atripe'*  
An Analysis in the History of Traditions of Eastern  
Christian Apocalyptic Motifs

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The texts known as "*Visions of Shenute*" represent a collection of revelation texts of Egyptian provenance. They are preserved in Coptic, Arabic and Ethiopic. The Ethiopic version, very probably a translation from an Arabic original is the latest and most extensive. These linguistic versions are very characteristic of the history of transmission of Coptic lore and literature, where, after the gradual loss of the Coptic language, literary production carried on in Arabic, which was later translated into Ethiopic. As is very well known, Ethiopic literature was largely dependent on Coptic literature, particularly from the early Middle Ages.

Christian literary production in Egypt continued to be very significant long after the Islamic conquest of the country. It formed in many ways a means of resistance to the Islamization and Arabization of the country. In spite of the use of the Arabic language, the literature of the Copts throughout the Middle Ages remained very distinctively Egyptian in its character, themes and scope. Although, as we know, the Christian Orient maintained an ongoing dialogue with the various local traditions of the Eastern Churches, the Coptic literature preserved elements characteristic of a "national" or local literature.

I suggest that the Coptic tradition, as developed after the Arabic invasions, can be partly reconstructed on the basis of the apocalyptic literature originating in this country. The special character of this literary genre can be revealing in many ways for the general "Zeitgeist" and for the feelings of the broader strata of the population compared to the more "traditional" theological literature composed by religious specialists, who were bearers of a certain education, ecclesiastical authority and often of very particular interests.

The emergence and subsequent rule of Islam gave rise to a renaissance of apocalyptic literature in the Eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire. Deriving from a historical period that has been characterized by a considerable lack of historical evidence, these texts have been regarded as valuable sources to exploit in order to gather some first-hand information about early encounters between Christians and Muslim Arabs.<sup>1</sup> This historical aspect of apocalyptic sources is in fact very important. The apocalyptic texts that have been composed in the first centuries of the Islamic conquests in Syria and Egypt describe in remarkably impressive and powerful pictures the Christian reception and understanding of Islam and they also deliver valuable reports and first-hand testimonies of life under this new political rule. They all belong *—per definitionem—* to the genre of the political or historical apocalypse.<sup>2</sup> These are in fact texts that integrate and try to give sense to their actual historical and political experience through the medium of this particular literary genre. There is not, to my knowledge, any original Christian apocalyptic writing from this period and of this geographical provenance that deals exclusively with metaphysical or theological questions and speculations. Other typical features of earlier apocalyptic literature such as heavenly journeys or descriptions of hell are also missing.

The most influential and popular text of this literature has been the Syriac *Pseudo-Methodius*, which was believed to have influenced the entire literary production of apocalyptic literature in the Christian Orient and in the Christian West too.<sup>3</sup> To my mind, this was only partly

<sup>1</sup> On the historical importance of apocalyptic literature, see in particular: P.J. ALEXANDER, "Medieval Apocalypses as Historical Sources", *The American Historical Review* 73 (1968), pp. 997-1018 and J. ISKANDER, "Islamization in Medieval Egypt: The Coptic-Arabic 'Apocalypse of Samuel' as a source for the social and religious history of medieval Egypt", *ME* 43 (1995), pp. 219-227.

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive classification of apocalyptic texts, see J.J. COLLINS, "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre", *Seneca* 14 (1979), pp. 1-19 and IDEM, *The Apocalyptic Imagination. An Introduction to the Jewish Matrix of Christianity* (New York, 1987), esp. pp. 1-32.

<sup>3</sup> See G.J. REIMINK, *Die syrische Apokalypse des Pseudo-Methodius*, CSCO 540, Script. Syr. 220 [textus]. Script. Syr. 221 [versio] (Louvain, 1993), H. SUERMANN, *Die geschichtstheologische Reaktion auf die einfallenden Muslime in der edessischen Apokalypse des 7. Jahrhunderts* (Bern, 1985), and F.J. MARTINEZ, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic in the Early Muslim Period: Pseudo-Methodius and Pseudo-Athanasius* [unpublished Ph.D. dissertation] (Washington DC: Catholic University of America,

true for the apocalyptic literature from Egypt. Egyptian literature not only addresses historical, political and social themes, of special concern to Egypt, thus providing us with valuable information on these matters, but it also refers to a particularly Egyptian literary tradition. I am referring here to writings such as the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Athanasius*,<sup>4</sup> the *Apocalypse of Samuel of Qalamun*,<sup>5</sup> the *Letter of Pisenius*<sup>6</sup> and the *Apocalypse of Shenute* in the Arabic version of his *Vita*.<sup>7</sup>

The Coptic apocalypses develop certain characteristic features compared with the other apocalypses from this period, which enables their classification as a distinct body of literature. They share a common geographical, cultural and historical background, and, in addition, they demonstrate a phenomenological similarity.

Well-known motifs from earlier apocalyptic literature are integrated into a more general schema, which is specifically Coptic or Egyptian. Coptic apocalypses are strongly paraenetic and they emphasize that only the restoration of the ecclesiastical and confessional purity and integrity can bring the final redemption. I would like to exemplify my argument here with the texts known as the *Visions of Shenute*.

Shenute, Archimandrite of the White Monastery in the late fourth and early fifth century, represented the embodiment of the Coptic glorious past for the later Coptic Church under Muslim rule. Coptic apocalyptic literature applies a new model of revelatory authority,

1985), esp. pp. 2-246; Juan Pedro MONFERRER SALA, "Membrã del Pseudo Metodio y Yonón, el cuarto hijo de Noé. Notas a propósito de un posible origen de la leyenda oriental Ilegada a Hispania en el s. VII", *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos* 50 (2001), pp. 213-230.

<sup>4</sup> For this text, see F.J. MARTINEZ, *Eastern Christian Apocalyptic*, esp. pp. 247-590 and B. WITTE, *Die Sünden der Priester und der Mönche: Koptische Eschatologie des 8. Jahrhunderts nach Kodes M 602 pp. 104-164 (ps.-Athanasius) der Papyrus Monogram Library*, ASKA 12 (Altenberge, 2002); Juan Pedro MONFERRER SALA, "Literatura apocalíptica cristiana en árabe. Con un avance de edición del Apocalipsis árabe-copto del Pseudo Atanasio", *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos* 48 (1999), pp. 231-254.

<sup>5</sup> See J. ZIADEH, "L'apocalypse de Samuel", *ROC* 19 (1914), pp. 79-92, 302-323, 445-446.

<sup>6</sup> See A. PERIER, "Lettre de Pisenius, évêque de Qef à ses fidèles", *ROC* 20 (1915-1917), pp. 374-404.

<sup>7</sup> E. AMELINEAU, *Monuments pour servir à l'histoire de l'Égypte chrétienne aux II<sup>e</sup> et I<sup>e</sup> siècles*, MMAc 4 (Paris, 1888). The *Vision* is to be found in pp. 338-349 of part VI: 'Vie de Schenoudi, Traduite de l'arabe', pp. 289-478. This vision is not to be confused with the *Visions* discussed later in this paper.

which is developed following the tradition of a culture hero, the prophetic Holy Man. The revelation takes the form of a prophecy. In a time of deep religious and ecclesiastical crisis, as is described in the texts themselves, the pseudobiographical heroes that receive the visionary revelations are no longer ante-diluvian, biblical patriarchs as in the Jewish apocalyptic tradition, or apostolic and gospel figures like in the Christian tradition, but they are local legendary or prominent clerics and abbots, like Athanasius, Shenute, Samuel of Qalamun, etc. The crisis of the church under Islamic rule makes this literary shift necessary. The visionaries must now be figures that represent the glory and steadfastness of the Egyptian church, and only these can convey the hope for the restoration of the ecclesiastical tradition and the final victory of the Christian faith.

There is a certain tradition in Egypt of *Visions of Shenute* that deals with a variety of themes of an apocalyptic and eschatological nature. A major issue is Muslim rule as a sign of the end. A most characteristic revelation of this kind is to be found in the already mentioned Arabic *Vita of Shenute*, where Jesus predicts in a *vaticinia ex eventu* form the hardships that Egypt and its people will have to suffer under the Persian and then the later Muslim invasions.<sup>8</sup>

The *Visions of Shenute* that I am going to discuss here belong to the same tradition. These texts in Arabic, Ethiopic and Coptic were edited and translated into German by Adolf Grohmann in 1913.<sup>9</sup> My analysis will be based on Shenute's *Vision*, which is extant only in Ethiopic. According to Grohmann, this Ethiopic translation of a probably Arabic text dates to the late 14<sup>th</sup> or, at the latest, the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>10</sup> It is

<sup>8</sup> See E. AMÉLINEAU, *Moumments*, pp. 338-349.

<sup>9</sup> A. GROHMANN, "Die im Äthiopischen, Arabischen und Koptischen erhaltenen Visionen Apa Shenute's von Atripe: I. Die im Äthiopischen erhaltenen Visionen", ZDMG 67 (1913), pp. 187-267 and A. GROHMANN, "Die im Äthiopischen, Arabischen und Koptischen erhaltenen Visionen Apa Shenute's von Atripe: II. Die arabischen Homilie des Cyrillus", ZDMG 68 (1914), pp. 1-32. This latter vision of Shenute, preserved in an Arabic Homily of Cyril, was written probably by a Syrian monk in a monastery in Egypt. It describes a heavenly journey of Shenute, where he attends a mass in heaven in the church of the undefiled ones, where the angels praise God and Jesus celebrates the mass. The congregation consists of perfect monks. At the end the punishments of hell are described and the importance of keeping the fast is stressed.

<sup>10</sup> See A. GROHMANN, "Die im Äthiopischen, Arabischen und Koptischen erhaltenen Visionen", pp. 208f.

preserved in seven manuscripts of three groups. The earliest manuscript dates to the 16<sup>th</sup> century and the latest to the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>11</sup> The number of the manuscripts testifies to a certain popularity of these texts. The *Visions* reflect Coptic apocalyptic tradition with some adaptations to the Ethiopic environment. Their main narrative frame is a revelation-dialogue between Shenute and the resurrected Jesus.

The text displays many of the features characteristic of a Coptic apocalypse. A great part of the text, in spite of its apocalyptic narrative frame, presents a homily of moralistic character, according to a common Coptic tradition. It focuses on theological issues and moral questions such as the reward of the righteous in the future world and the punishment of sinners. The question of the nature of sin is central. The text betrays a familiarity with popular apocalyptic texts of Egyptian origin, like the *Apocalypse of Peter*<sup>12</sup> and the *Apocalypse of Elijah*.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, it quotes numerous passages from the Old and the New Testament.

The text begins with the tenth vision about the punishment of sinners and Christians that do not repent. Jesus complains to God the Father about the meaning and purpose of his "shameful" sacrifice on the Cross.<sup>14</sup> God answers that some Christians will have to be punished in hell for a while, but Jesus will descend in order to bring them out of the underworld and lead them to the realm of the righteous.

While the events of the last days are described, the main issue remains the question of who is going to be saved, and who not, and why. The Christians who are going to be saved are those who did not reject the Gospel and did not dismiss the Law of Moses. The oil of

<sup>11</sup> On the MSS, see A. GROHMANN, "Die im Äthiopischen, Arabischen und Koptischen erhaltenen Visionen", pp. 191ff.

<sup>12</sup> The *Apocalypse of Peter*, known also as the Ethiopic *Apocalypse of Peter*, as it is extant in Ethiopic, although it was very probably originally composed in Greek. A Coptic version of the text exists as well. It was composed very probably in Egypt in the first half of the second century and the translation into Ethiopic must have been made through an Arabic translation. See, C.D.G. MÜLLER, "Offenbarung des Petrus", in HENNECKE/SCHNEEMELCHER, *NT Apokryphen*, II, pp. 562ff.

<sup>13</sup> The *Apocalypse of Elijah*, a strongly political apocalyptic text, is preserved in Coptic manuscripts from the late third or early fourth centuries, which go back to a Greek original text, see, O.S. WINTERMUTE, "Apocalypse of Elijah", in J.H. CHARLESWORTH (ed), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, (Garden City, N.Y., 1983), I, pp. 721ff.

<sup>14</sup> A. GROHMANN, "Die im Äthiopischen, Arabischen und Koptischen erhaltenen Visionen", p. 223.

baptism redeems only when it is accompanied by the right faith and good works.

Following this, Shenute builds a glorious church, which is threatened by Satan. However, after Shenute prays to God he is able to prevail over Satan. The archangel Michael stabilizes the church and reveals to Shenute that Jesus is going to celebrate the mass there until his Second Coming as a Judge.<sup>15</sup>

In this church a characteristic episode from the Coptic apocalyptic tradition takes place: before the Last Judgment two kings will rise: the king of Rome and the king of Ethiopia. The name of the king of Rome is unfortunately not preserved, but the name of the king of Ethiopia is given as *Tewoda*. Grohmann identifies him with the Ethiopian king, Tewodra (Theodoros), who reigned in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>16</sup> If this assumption is correct, it gives us a *terminus post quem* for the composition and translation of the text into Ethiopic. However, this motif appears as early as the 9<sup>th</sup> century in Egyptian apocalyptic texts, so our original text in Coptic or Arabic could be dated to any time between the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>17</sup>

The king of Rome and the king of Ethiopia will come to the Church of Shenute with their respective troops and their patriarchs. They will

<sup>15</sup> See A. GROHMANN, "Die im Äthiopischen, Arabischen und Koptischen erhaltenen Visionen", pp. 249ff.

<sup>16</sup> See A. GROHMANN, "Die im Äthiopischen, Arabischen und Koptischen erhaltenen Visionen", pp. 255ff.

<sup>17</sup> The motif of the dispute of the two kings on the right faith appears in the *Letter of Pseculius*, ed. PERIER, pp. 320-321 and also in an unedited Shenute-Apocalypse (ms. Paris Arabe 6147, fol. 61<sup>v</sup>-87<sup>v</sup>), see J. VAN LENT, "An unedited Copto-Arabic Apocalypse of Shenute from the Fourteenth Century: Prophecy and History", in St. EMMET et al. (eds.), *Ägypten und Nubien in spätantiker und christlicher Zeit. Akten des 6. Internationalen Koptologenkongresses* Münster, 20-26 Juli 1996 (Wiesbaden, 1999), II, pp. 155-168, esp. p. 163 and G. TROUPEAU, "De quelques apocalypses conservées dans des manuscrits arabes de Paris", PO 18 (1993), pp. 75-87, esp. 79-82. Finally, it also appears in the Ethiopic epic, *Kebra Nagast*, see C. BEZOLD, *Kebra Nagast. Die Herrlichkeit der Könige*, AKBAB 31 (München, 1905), ch. 117. The opponents here are not the Moslems but the Jews. The dating of the text remains an issue of controversy. F.J. MARTINEZ, "The King of Rüm and the King of Ethiopia in Medieval Apocalyptic Texts from Egypt", in *Coptic Studies: Acts of the Third International Congress of Coptic Studies* (Warschau, 1990), pp. 247-259, argues for a late dating (14<sup>th</sup> cent, see F.J. MARTINEZ, "The King of Rüm...", p. 257) contra I. SHAHID, "The *Kebra Nagast* in the Light of Recent Research", *Le Muséon* 89 (1976), pp. 133-178, who dated the work to the 6<sup>th</sup> century.

stay there for seven months, fighting over the right faith to no avail. Then, the patriarch of Alexandria will receive a vision, which will reveal the way to achieve the unity of faith. Following this vision, he will order dust from Golgatha to be brought to the Church. The Patriarch of Alexandria and the Patriarch of Rome will then celebrate mass in front of all Christians. Jews, Moslems and Pagans will also be present, and they will all be ready to convert in the event of a miracle.

The Holy Spirit descends then in the form of a white dove of miraculous appearance. It bears on its head a Cross of light. A face will appear on the Cross, resembling a lamb with seven horns and seven eyes. It will speak in a human voice, saying: "I am Jesus, from Bethlehem, in the Land of Judah, the God of the Jacobites".<sup>18</sup> It will remain hovering over the sacrifice of the patriarch of Alexandria.

The king of Ethiopia will cry aloud of having seen God. Meanwhile, the people of Rome will start weeping, but, confronted with this explicit vision, they will throw their Scriptures into the sea. The Romans, Jews, Moslems and Pagans will become baptized in the right faith, and they will be sent to their respective peoples to preach to them. However, those who refuse to believe and worship will face the sword. The king of Ethiopia will conduct a military campaign against Mecca. Egypt and Rome will be forced to pay him tribute and he will reign over Jerusalem. A period of peace and happiness will commence, and demons will be kept tied up for forty years. After this time seven kings will rule and the last one will be the Antichrist, the Anti-Messiah. The text concludes with a summary of the Last Judgment and the destruction of the world.

In the context of Christian apocalyptic literature that emerged as a reaction to the Islamic invasions, this text represents a very interesting example of development and shift in interests. While all the texts from the first centuries of Islamic rule belong clearly to the genre of political apocalypse, this is to my knowledge the first text to deal extensively with eschatological questions and to return to descriptions of visions of the heavenly world.

The episode of the dispute of the two kings is revealing in a number of ways. F.J. Martinez has analyzed in an illuminating article the

<sup>18</sup> A. GROHMANN, "Die im Äthiopischen, Arabischen und Koptischen erhaltenen Visionen", p. 259.

history of this motif, which is characteristic of later apocalypses from Egypt and is to be found only in these. He maintains that the origin of this motif derives from Pseudo-Methodius. Pseudo-Methodius, a Syriac text, was the source that introduced into the Christian literature of this period the motif of the legendary Last Emperor, who will overcome the Muslims, re-conquer Jerusalem and re-establish Christian rule.<sup>19</sup> The Last Emperor also called the Emperor of the Greeks and actually modelled after Alexander the Great and the emperor Constantine,<sup>20</sup> is a figure that became extremely popular in the literature of the Christian Orient. It was very soon adopted by the Greek Byzantine literature and became a notorious element of folklore until late in the Ottoman period – not to say until the present day.

The provinces of the empire re-invented the genre of Christian apocalyptic literature after the Islamic conquests. They began to transform it anew while finding themselves in confrontation with this challenging political and religious power, that Islam represented. Under these circumstances, they also found the need to reconstruct their own community identity. Particularly in Egypt apocalyptic texts continued to be written and read late into medieval times, very probably in the monasteries of Upper Egypt. Accordingly, these texts reflect distinctively this monastic milieu.

On the basis of the Coptic literary tradition, the Copts continue to cultivate their own particular and unique identity. It is the Coptic texts that first demonstrate that they feel uncomfortable with the choice of that special eschatological hero, the Last Emperor of Pseudo-Methodius. Among these texts the Last Emperor is mentioned only in the *Apocalypse of Samuel of Qalamun* and in the *Letter of Pistentius*, but not in the *Apocalypse of Pseudo-Athanasius* or in the *Apocalypse of Shenute*.

<sup>19</sup> On the motif of the Last Emperor, see (selectively), P.J. ALEXANDER, "Byzantium and the Migration of Literary Works and Motifs: The Legend of the Last Roman Emperor", *Medievalia et humanistica* 2 (1971), pp. 47-68; IDEM, "The Medieval Legend of the Last Roman Emperor and its Messianic Origin", *Journal of the Warburg and Courland Institutes* 41 (1978), pp. 1-15 and H. SIERMANN, "Der byzantinische Endkaiser bei Pseudo-Methodius", OC 71 (1987), pp. 140-155.

<sup>20</sup> In Pseudo-Methodius the Last Emperor is a descendant of an Ethiopian princess and Ethiopia still plays in the text a significant symbolic role, commonly going back to an interpretation of Psalm 158:32.

However, in the *Letter of Pistentius* even if immediate liberation from Muslim rule has to come through this Roman or Greek king, who "unfortunately" is still a Chalcedonian, he will eventually have to accept the Orthodox truth after his victory. In a narrative pattern similar to that in the *Visions of Shenute*, he will throw the books of Chalcedon into the fire.

For the authors of these texts the objection is not a political one, but it bears a significant confessional meaning. They apparently could not be satisfied with the rule of a Chalcedonian emperor, even if they would welcome his military victory over the Muslims. After the final victory, the matter of faith had to be solved with a clear triumph of the orthodox – the Monophysite – truth. The right faith had to be vindicated first and then established as the only faith blessed by God.

As F.J. Martinez stresses:

«No matter how useful the cooperation of the Byzantines could be to get rid of the Muslim yoke, the question of orthodoxy admits no compromise: for a lasting peace to be possible, that question has to be settled, and only God can do it».<sup>21</sup>

In the Ethiopic *Visions of Shenute*, the political apocalyptic part forms only a minor section of the text. It seems that the concerns of the community, as reflected in the text, are not so strongly of an apocalyptic outlook, but focus on a good moral conduct in everyday life in anticipation of the rewards in the afterlife. The author or authors of this text, in addition to its main addressees, are not primarily concerned with the preservation of the faith as such, but with the consolidation of the faith of a community that appears to be in the process of making sense of its new position in Islamic society. To be a baptized Christian is not enough for salvation; one has to be a good Christian as well. The redeeming role of Jesus has to be re-stated, as well as the conditions of the redemption.

Heavenly visions and eschatological rewards or punishment become here more important than the actual political history which was a more central concern of the earlier texts. This text does not provide us with any political or historical information about Islamic rule or the fate of the Christians in Egypt at all. We can observe in this

<sup>21</sup> F.J. MARTINEZ, "The King of Rûm...", p. 259.

text a shift in interest from history to religion, while religion and spirituality become particularly important.

The main issue of the political apocalyptic part of the *Visions* is the issue of faith, and, in particular, of right faith. Here, even before the military confrontation with the Muslims – which is a minor episode in the text, the triumph of the Monophysite faith has to be demonstrated in all its glory. It has to be Jesus carried by the Holy Spirit, who explains: "I am Jesus, the God of the Jacobites".

The miracle does not only affect the Christians of the other confessions, here of course the Chalcedonians are meant, but also all the other religions. Jews, Pagans and Moslems will convert their people into the right faith. The Monophysite faith triumphs all over the world, primarily as a result of conversion.

I think that the final intention of our text is fairly clear. The Christians of Egypt have overcome the initial shock of the Islamic conquests, and they appear to start accommodating themselves to the new state of things. There is no reference whatsoever to repressions or persecutions, in striking contrast to all the rest of this specific body of literature. Conversion does not appear to be a major issue either. This text could have been written in a time of relative peace for Egypt, perhaps during the Fatimid period. Although the text betrays a certain latent hatred against Moslems, it still acknowledges that the Muslims have the ability to recognize and even endorse the right faith.

The liberating Last Emperor is not going to be a Greek, a Byzantine ruler, but an Ethiopian, and his mission is not going to be primarily political but religious. His aim is not the general restoration of a Christian rule, but the restoration of Monophysite faith as the absolute world faith. However, the *Visions* do not reflect anti-Chalcedonian feelings as such, but rather a developing estrangement from the Byzantine political power.<sup>22</sup>

This is a late text from a period, when the bonds with the Byzantine centre had been severed, and when there were no longer any illusions

about a final political victory over Muslim rule. Individual salvation becomes the focus. I think that this text marks the last stage of a distinct apocalyptic literary tradition as developed in reaction to the Islamic conquest. There are no real aspirations for a restoration of a Christian empire, but a lasting concern for the preservation of the faith and the church.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. F.J. MARTINEZ, "The King of Rûm...", who stresses that: "In this respect, the apocalypses (...) betray a very sincere longing for Christian unity, and that, independently of spontaneous feelings towards the Byzantines ..." (p. 259); cf. J. ZABOROWSKI, who follows up this argument in a recent article: "Egyptian Christians Implicating Chalcedonians in the Arab Takeover of Egypt: The Arabic Apocalypse of Qalamûn", OC 87 (2003), pp. 100-115.

# CHRIST, THE ICON OF THE FATHER, IN EVAGRIAN THEOLOGY \*

AUGUSTINE CASIDAY

## *Status quaestionis*

Modern scholarship has much to say about Evagrius Ponticus' teaching on imageless prayer. Columba Stewart has recently offered an account of how Evagrius applied Stoic principles to articulate his teaching.<sup>1</sup> This follows an admirable exposition of Evagrius' psychology by the late doyen of Evagrian studies, Antoine Guillaumont; and his brief but enormously learned account of the Neoplatonism of Evagrian prayer.<sup>2</sup> These works have shown that Evagrius regarded images, along with thoughts and concepts, as a serious impediment to the intellect's prayerful ascent.<sup>3</sup> This is why it is necessary for the Christian to go "immaterial to the Immaterial."<sup>4</sup> But how far did Evagrius extend his suspicion of images? In her study of the Origenist controversy, Elizabeth Clark used the arresting phrase "mental iconoclasm" to describe Evagrius' position.<sup>5</sup> She finds evidence

\* Peculiar abbreviations are at the end of the paper.

<sup>1</sup> Columba Stewart, "Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus", *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9.2 (2001) 173-204.

<sup>2</sup> Antoine Guillaumont, "Introduction", in ed. Paul Géhin et al., *Évagre le Pontique. Sur les pensées*, SC 438 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1998) 9-33; "cog"; and *idem*, "Pregiera, II: La 'pregiera pura' di Evagrio e l'influsso del Neoplatonismo", *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione* 7.591-595.

<sup>3</sup> Striking evidence for this preoccupation of Evagrius' can be found at [ps.-Nilus], *De oratione* 117-120 (PG 79.1193; "orat."); ps.-*Supplementum ad Kephalaia Gnostica* 20 (ed. W. Frankenberg, *Evagrius Ponticus* [Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1912] 440; "ps.-Suppl."); and *Praktikos* 65 (SC 171[iii].650; "prak").

<sup>4</sup> Evagrius, *orat* 66 (*aulos auloi*: PG 79.1181); and, we might add, it is likewise for the Plotinian: cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.7.8, 6.7.34.7, 6.9.11.51 (ed. A.H. Armstrong, *Plotinus*, 7 vols., LCL [London: William Heinemann, 1966-1968]: 1.252, 7.190, 7.344; "Armstrong").

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992) 4; "Clark"). Elsewhere she describes Evagianism as

for this in Evagrius' account of prayer and in his understanding of the Eucharist, and links it to belief in the plastic, transformable character of rational creatures. Her suggestion is provocative and potentially very satisfying. It suggests a certain intellectual daring, and co-opts Evagrius into the theological heritage of Byzantine iconoclasm; it also insists on a level of consistency in Evagian theology that is elegant and economic. In short, the merits of her claim compel us to take it seriously.

So plausible is the claim that some might think that simply to announce it is to establish it. But this is insufficient. Talking of iconoclasm in a fourth-century author is anachronistic; the term can be very misleading (even irresponsibly so) if casually used, and should therefore only be applied judiciously, if at all. In her admirable article "Art and the Early Church,"<sup>6</sup> Sister Charles Murray has warned us that, for at least a century, scholars who have reportedly found latent iconoclasm in early Christian writings, have rested their claims on highly doubtful presuppositions. In light of this warning, one wants to give more attention to Prof. Clark's claim that Evagian theology is at base iconoclastic. In the present essay, I will attempt to answer this basic question: in what sense, if any, is it fair to speak of Evagian iconoclasm? To answer this question, I lay out the chief doctrines of iconoclasm and locate Evagrius' alleged iconoclasm with respect to them; analyse the arguments in favour of attributing such a doctrine to Evagrius; critique those arguments with reference to other aspects of Evagrius' theology; and suggest an alternative metaphor that is more in keeping with Evagian theology as a whole. To anticipate my conclusions, I will argue that focusing on "iconoclasm" (a radical rejection of images, and sometimes matter, too) is deeply counterproductive. It not only promotes threadbare prejudices about Evagrius' orthodoxy, it also distracts us from the fact that matter has its proper place in the graded, hierarchical

<sup>6</sup> "anti-ionic theology" and an "internalized form of iconoclasm" (pp. 75-76); and Evagrius as "the quintessential iconoclast" (p. 84). Although this book has been widely hailed as magisterial and has become an instant classic, it is not without problems; see Mark Sheridan, "Compte rendu: Elizabeth A. Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*", *Collectanea cisterciensia* 58 (1996) 38-42.

<sup>7</sup> Sister Charles Murray, "Art and the Early Church", *Journal of Theological Studies* n.s. 28 (1977) 303-345.

scheme of his spiritual teaching. More significantly, it gravely distorts the Christological concerns evident in Evagrius' teaching. The purposes of this essay, then, will be to redress the misapprehension that Evagrius was an iconoclast *avant la lettre*; to describe, if perfunctorily, the relationship between Christ and matter in Evagrian theology; and finally to suggest that we may more fruitfully think of the aspect of Evagian prayer under consideration as *apophatic* — that is, within the classic distinction of *apophasis* and *kataphasis* in Greek theology. To make my case, I will draw in evidence from writings by Plotinus, Hypatius of Ephesus, Eusebius of Caesarea, the fathers of the *Philokalia*, and, of course, Evagrius himself. The scope of these preliminary considerations is wide, but it is needed for accurately situating Evagrius' works within the larger context of ancient theology.

The first thing to do is examine the term "iconoclasm," to preclude any confusion deriving from the two distinct meanings of that term. In addition to the term's specialized meaning in Church history that we will discuss shortly, "iconoclast" has acquired the immediately available (if somewhat vague) popular meaning of "one who destroys cherished beliefs." In the present case, this ambivalence tends to elide Evagrius' reputation as a heretic with his putative iconoclastic tendencies: the "bad boy" of Greek theology is presented as an iconoclast on both counts. But these meanings of the term can be separated, and indeed it should be, if we are to arrive at a satisfactory conclusion. Without an articulate account of what it was about iconoclasts that made them iconoclasts, we cannot rightly say whether Evagrius was one or not. So an excursus devoted to that question is in order. A related widespread assumption also requires our attention: the assumption that Neoplatonism entails hostility toward matter. In much the same way that we may be tempted to think we know what iconoclasm was without explaining it, we may be tempted to think we know what Neoplatonic attitudes toward matter were without explaining them. I suggest that these are temptations we must avoid. And I believe that once some account has been made of what iconoclasts and Neoplatonists thought, it will become clear that Evagrius' theology is not very much like Clark's description of it and, more generally, that a substantial qualification to talking about Evagrius' attitude toward matter is needed.



### *Grounds for iconoclasm*

There are several motivations for iconoclasm. Looking back, an iconoclast might find no justification for iconography and appeal to tradition to justify the rejection of icons. Thus the definition of the iconoclast Council of Hiercia (754), wherein we read: "The wretched name of icons falsely so-called does not owe its origins to Christ, or the Apostles, or the Fathers..."<sup>7</sup> Likewise, at the Council of St. Sophia (815), the definition offered is firmly rooted in Patristic and conciliar precedents.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the emperor and theologian Constantine V. (Copronymus) appealed to theological and especially Christological reasons for repudiating iconography.<sup>9</sup> Lowbrow iconoclasts may well have been motivated by the perverse thrill of wanton destruction, since iconoclast councils seem to have been at pains to forestall such sequels to their decisions.<sup>10</sup> Or, more to our purposes, epistemological considerations may have prompted iconoclasm. If indeed material things impede or misdirect our approach to the divine, then clearly material representations of divine subjects are to be rejected. The putative iconoclasm of Evagrius is ostensibly of this sort, though it must be noted that Evagrius never explicitly makes this claim himself. We can, however, find an articulate statement of this position in the sophisticated objections against icons advanced by John the Grammarian.<sup>11</sup>

John rejects icons because he considers images to be inadequate and incapable of the specificity required for offering an accurate definition of any particular person:

It does not work to characterize a given person by any conception unless it is by a verbal interpretation, by which each thing that exists can be perceived definitely (*horistikos*). For one's accidental (*synbebēkota*)

<sup>7</sup> Iconoclast council of 754, *horos* 4 (ed. H. Hennephof, *Textus byzantinos ad iconomachiam pertinentes* [Leiden: Brill, 1969] 68, item 227; "Hennephof"). All the translations given in this essay are my own, unless otherwise stated.

<sup>8</sup> See Hennephof, 79-84, items 265-286.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-57, 65-68, items 220-226.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 73, item 247.

<sup>11</sup> John the Grammarian, *Antirrheticus* (J. Gouillard, "Fragments inédits d'un antirrhétique de Jean le Grammairien", *Revue des études byzantines* 24 [1966] 170-181).

distinctive features, by which he is set apart from those like him and from the common essence (*kekonōnēken*) in a different way than the others: they are in no useful way present for visual perception. And since [it is the case that] a given fellow's family is introduced or his exact country registered (not to mention the character of his skill and manner of living, and the character of acquaintances with which he is blessed, quite apart from the training of his habits!); [and] by this he is characterized as praiseworthy or blameworthy, [so that] he is knowable by some verbal conception or other — well then, distinguishing a given person by icons is truly impossible.<sup>12</sup>

On John's argument, any given person therefore represents a set of attributes so complex that it is impossible to portray that person adequately. (And this is to say nothing at all of Christ's divine, distinctive attributes!) The choice of verbs is important: the person cannot be *portrayed* adequately; but he can be *defined* adequately. Language, according to John, is supple and dynamic enough to accomplish what is impossible for crude, static depictions.<sup>13</sup> In what survives, John does not address himself to the question of devotional use of icons at prayer.<sup>14</sup> But we can make some tentative deductions from the except that we have just seen: because images are insufficiently specific, there are potentially too many referents for any given image; therefore their accuracy is not — and indeed cannot be — guaranteed.

John was a clever man and his arguments for iconoclasm are, to the best of my knowledge, novel. Jean Gouillard has claimed

<sup>12</sup> By contrast, Plotinus' enthusiasm for Egyptian hieroglyphs — sacred pictures, as he thought — is also sharply at odds with the Grammarian's claim: for Plotinus, those pictures "revealed the non-discursiveness of it [sc., the intelligible world]" (*Enneads* 5.8.6.1-9; Armstrong, 5.256) and, because their immediate unity satisfactorily models the unity of truth, were thus more satisfactory than language composed of parts.

<sup>13</sup> It would appear that John impressed this point upon Naukratius when he cross-examined him, drawing particularly on an argument by Theodotus in which the painted image is denounced in favour of the written word for purposes of edification and inspiration; see Theodore the Studite, *Epistula* 380 (*Corpus fontium historiae Byzantinae* 31[2], 511-519; "ep"). I thank Revd Canon G. W. A. Thorne for drawing my attention to this letter.

<sup>14</sup> Theodore the Studite's letters to him (*epp* 528, 546 [31(2), 788, 825-827]) strongly suggest that John objected to icons because he felt their use involved a fundamental error in theology: worshipping the creation rather than the Creator, to borrow a phrase.

that John's analysis "is familiar to all spiritual [author]s of Evagrius' lineage."<sup>15</sup> Certainly, John's epistemological objections dovetail the psychological concerns found in Evagrius, who was concerned that images tend to distract their viewers. And yet there is actually rather too little evidence here for us to be confident about the provenance of John's ideas. In any case, it is not altogether accurate to trace John's intellectual lineage only as far back as Evagrius, since similar objections to iconography can be found in Eusebius of Caesarea's letter to Constantia Augusta.<sup>16</sup> Of Eusebius' fondness for Origen, there is no doubt. In his *Church History* 6.19 and 6.23-32, Eusebius includes a lengthy and frankly encomiastic biography of Origen, which takes the form of an apology on Origen's behalf. In the letter under examination, much evidence of Origen's influence can be found.<sup>17</sup> Since Origen mightily influenced Evagrius as well, Eusebius' position can tentatively be taken as a working hypothesis for what Evagrius might have thought about icons.

Over half-a-century ago, Fr. Georges Florovsky pointed to Eusebius' letter as a way of accounting for Origenist influence in the iconoclast movement;<sup>18</sup> and indeed the iconoclasts (in whose florilegia Eusebius' letter is preserved in fragments) clearly found Eusebius' reproving tone and high-minded rejection of icons congenial reading. There are two curiosities that deserve our attention, however. The first concerns the attribution of this letter to Eusebius. Upon reading this letter, some have charged Eusebius

<sup>15</sup> J. Gouillard, "Fragments inédits d'un antirrhétique de Jean le Grammairien", *Revue des études byzantines* 24 (1966) 174-175.

<sup>16</sup> Hennephof, 42-44.

<sup>17</sup> For example, this influence is evident in Eusebius' tendency throughout to distinguish Christ from the Logos and subordinate the former to the latter; in his simultaneous affirmation that Christ was the Logos incarnate and subtle devaluation of Christ's flesh as "the form of a slave" (*ad Constantium* 1-2 [Hennephof, 42]); in his appeal to the Transfiguration as the moment in which God the Word is revealed (*ibid.* 3 [Hennephof, 42-43]); in his insistence on the formlessness of God (*ibid.* 5 [Hennephof, 43]); and in the strong emphasis (to the evident exclusion of icons) he places on the vision of God, "face to face", that will be enjoyed by the pure of heart (*ibid.* 8 [Hennephof, 44]).

<sup>18</sup> G. Florovsky, "Origen, Eusebius, and the Iconoclastic Controversy", *Church History* 19 (1950) 77-96.

with inconsistency:<sup>19</sup> he was nonplussed, if unimpressed, in reporting about the statue of Christ established as a tribute by the miraculously healed woman with the issue of blood;<sup>20</sup> how, then, could he take such a strong line against Constantia's request for an icon? Actually, this dilemma admits of resolution: the ancient sculpture was a public monument, while what Constantia requested was evidently an icon for devotional use. This is why Eusebius upbraided his imperial correspondent with a lesson in Christology, and it leads us to a limited, but important, observation: function matters. Presumably, the statue was not at the centre of a religious cult, so it did not prompt the same concerns that the request for an icon did.<sup>21</sup> If this is accepted, there is no reason to question the attribution of this letter to Eusebius.

The second point — already made by Florovsky, but too readily overlooked — is best appreciated after considering the metaphysics of Eusebius' letter. By calling Constantia to reject the image in favour of the prototype, Eusebius basically insists that the exemplar to which any copy refers must always be preferred to the copy, and in this way antagonistically gives a Platonic account of how matter and form relate. This allows us to classify his argument as iconoclastic, and it might lead us to think that Platonism and Origenism are in some fundamental way ill-disposed toward matter and therefore toward the material representation of ideal realities. However — and here we return to Florovsky's point — Neoplatonism does not necessarily entail iconoclasm. It can also support arguments in favour of icons, as

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Sr Murray, 326-328, see fn. 6, above.

<sup>20</sup> Eusebius, *Historia ecclesiastica* 7.18 (GCS 9[i].672).

<sup>21</sup> This is corroborated by Eusebius' approving report of how Constantine's mother-in-law alerted him to the establishment of images *and* an altar at the spot where the Oak of Mamre stood, which were destroyed so that a proper church could be established there (*ad Constantium* 3.52-53 [GCS 59(a).105-107]). This precedes a long list of pagan idols destroyed by Constantine's order. But in the former case the offenders are not designated as "pagans", they are simply called "impious" and "superstitious" people. Perhaps this (admittedly subtle) distinction indicates that Constantine undertook these measures because the relevant people worshipping at Mamre were impious and superstitious Christians. Sozomen's account (*HE* 2.4) specifically mentions that Jews, Christians and Pagans were worshipping there.

in the classic slogan from St. Basil: "The honour paid to the *icon* passes over to the prototype";<sup>22</sup> or Denys' less celebrated, but equally telling, dictum: "... with perceptible *icons*, if the painter focuses on the archetype uninterruptedly, looking away to nothing else and not distracted for a moment, he duplicates the exact thing in written form (so to speak), and reveals the truth in the likeness, the archetype in the *icon*, this one in that one — apart from the difference in being..."<sup>23</sup> In Christian hands, the Platonic tradition can be made to support iconography as readily as it can be made to support iconoclasm. Fr Florovsky described this bifurcated influence of Platonism as "two Hellenisms."<sup>24</sup>

### *The ambivalence of Neoplatonism*

This ambivalence is also evident in non-Christian sources. Porphyry provides a famous example of Neoplatonic iconoclast sentiment by relating how Plotinus obstinately refused to sit for an artist, and how Amelius, one of his disciples, thwarted Plotinus' wishes by hiring a painter to attend Plotinus' lectures so that he could then sketch Plotinus from memory and, with Amelius' help, complete the *icon*.<sup>25</sup> According to Porphyry, Plotinus disliked the prospect of being portrayed on account of his desire for the time when he could be divested of his body.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Basil, *De Spiritu sancto* 18.45 (PG 32.149).

<sup>23</sup> Denys, *De Ecclesiastica hierarchia* 4.3 (PTS 36.97.5-11). This and the passage from Basil are quoted, e.g., by St. Theodore the Studite in his letter to Nauratius (*ep* 380; see fn. 13). Other relevant passages concerning the application of symbols to God and the way of "unknowing" — i.e., apophatic theology — are *De divinis nominibus* 7.3 (PTS 33.197-198); *De mystica theologia*, passim (PTS 36.141-150); and *De coelesti hierarchia* 2 (PTS 36.9-17).

<sup>24</sup> Florovsky, 92-96; and Glenn Peers, *Sable Bodies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001) 66-67 fn. 12. To Peers belongs the credit for resurrecting Florovsky's "two Hellenisms" — everyone else seems to have bizarrely assumed that Origenists ought to be iconoclasts of necessity; e.g., P.J. Alexander, *The Patriarch Nicephorus* (Oxford: OUP, 1958) 44 fn. 1, cf. 214-217, 222; L.W. Barnard, *The Graeco-Roman and Oriental Background of the Iconoclastic Controversy* (Leiden: Brill, 1974) 145 fn. 10.

<sup>25</sup> Porphyry, *u. Plotini* 1.7, 1.18; N.B., "icon" is Porphyry's word, not mine (Armstrong, 1.2, 1.4).

<sup>26</sup> We find rejections of iconography for parallel reasons in contemporary Christian writings like the *Acts of St. John* (Hennepf, 59-60, item 198).

Porphyry's life, which was intended according to one modern interpreter to show up the futility of Amelius' scheme by offering instead a biography that could "give a truer image of Plotinus than would a visual portrait,"<sup>27</sup> lovingly dwells on Plotinus' majestic disdain for the flesh. In the face of debilitating illness, Plotinus declined to take even basic measures to restore his health,<sup>28</sup> preferring as it would seem to prepare for death with equanimity in the grandest Platonic tradition.<sup>29</sup>

Even so, Plotinus' own way of distinguishing reason from matter is not particularly antagonistic. His objections to the Gnostics<sup>30</sup> and his affirmation of the goodness of matter that is conformed to reason<sup>31</sup> stand at odds with Plutarch's dualism, for instance. According to Plutarch, matter is actively disruptive and hostile to order.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, Plotinus' writings confirm that to be a Neoplatonist is not necessarily to be an iconoclast, despite the expectations that Porphyry's introductory anecdote to the *Life*

Even though this passage is more aniconic than iconoclastic, it provided an irresistible authority for the iconoclastic Council of 754.

<sup>27</sup> M. Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000) 1 fn. 4. Earlier, he developed this analysis in some detail: "A Portrait of Plotinus", *Classical Quarterly* 43 (1993) 480-490.

<sup>28</sup> Porphyry, *u. Plotini* 2.1-16 (Armstrong, 1.4).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Plato, *Phaedo* 64a (ed. H.N. Fowler, Plato, LCL [London: William Heinemann, 1966]: 1.222); Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.18.7-9 (Armstrong, 2.296).

<sup>30</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.16-18; cf. 2.4 (Armstrong, 2.284-300; 2.106-148).

<sup>31</sup> At *Enneads* 2.9.3.18-21 (Armstrong, 2.234). Plotinus indicates that matter will always be illuminated by the *theia*. For Plotinus' doctrine of matter, I am chiefly indebted to the works of Denis O'Brien: "Plotinus and the Gnostics on the Generation of Matter", in ed. H.J. Blumenthal and R.A. Markus, *Neoplatonism and Early Christian Thought* (London: Variorum, 1981) 108-123; "Plotinus on Evil: a Study of Matter and the Soul in Plotinus' Conception of Human Evil", *Downside Review* 87 (1969) 68-110 (this later was expanded and published in *Le Neoplatonisme* [Paris: CNRS, 1971] 113-146; but I have not had access to it); and Plotinus on the origin of Matter (Naples: CNR, 1991). That last work amply attests to the controversy O'Brien has generated — not least, one suspects, by his style which is sometimes delightful, sometimes condescending — but his claims insofar as I understand them seem altogether sound.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Plutarch, *Moralia* 65 (= *De animi procreatione in Timaeum*) 5, 1014a-b; *Moralia* 136 (= *Platonicae quaestiones*) 4, 1002e-1003b (ed. Harold Cherniss, *Plutarch's Moralia*, vol. 13.1, LCL [London: William Heinemann, 1976] 178-182, 46-50).

of Plotinus might well foster. In his analysis of art, Plotinus uses terms similar to those of the iconophiles, when he affirms that "whenever someone admires one thing made like another, he has admiration for that in the likeness of which the other thing has been made."<sup>33</sup> Against the Gnostics, he insists that beauty is beauty, whether it is evident in beautiful material things or in beautiful supernal things, then makes this remarkable claim: "... one does not hold them [sc., beautiful material things], but goes from them to the others [sc., beautiful supernal things], while not scorning and despising them."<sup>34</sup> It scarcely need be said that this is not an iconoclastic attitude. He similarly endorses the value of meditating on the beauty and order of creation,<sup>35</sup> and his doctrines of aesthetics and ethics coincide precisely because that sort of admiring meditation promotes pure behaviour and re-establishes the basic unity of the viewer with the beauty that is viewed.<sup>36</sup> Images clearly enjoy an important place in Plotinus' philosophy. Images, not least beautiful images, serve to recall the viewer to reality.<sup>37</sup> The beauty represented in images, according to Plotinus, calls us to a proper relationship to God.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, the case of Plotinus shows us that more evidence than simple Neoplatonism is required to make for a compelling charge of iconoclasm.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.8.12-13 (Armstrong, 5.262).

<sup>34</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.17.37-38; he states the principle in an ascetic idiom at 1.6.8.7-18 (Armstrong, 2.294; 1.256).

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 5.8.7 (Armstrong, 2.256-262).

<sup>36</sup> See Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.6.3.10-31 and 1.6.7.9, for the moral and ascetic imperatives of contemplation, and 1.6.9.33, the corollary of deification (Armstrong, 1.240-242, 252-262).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.8.27-29 (Armstrong, 2.254): "But if there is need [for a cosmos], and there is no other, then this is the one that preserves a reflection of that [intelligible world] while bringing it down."

<sup>38</sup> Plotinus, *Enneads* 2.9.17.33-38 (Armstrong, 2.292-294); I therefore cannot accept Edward's claim that "All beauty of the visible, at worst meretricious, is at best unfruitful" ("A Portrait of Plotinus", *Classical Quarterly* 43 [1993] 486). Beauty of any sort can be extremely fruitful in the Plotinian scheme. And this certainly includes the plastic arts: for example, Plotinus writes of experiencing the relevant sorts of intuition and emotion upon the viewing of "graphic arts" (2.9.17.44-48 [Armstrong, 2.288]).

<sup>39</sup> Note, also, that Plotinus is prepared even to allow some measure of reality to matter: cf. *Enneads* 5.8.7.22-23 (Armstrong, 5.258-260): "And so

Turning from Plotinus to a Christian author, we find a comparable explanation of the value of religious imagery at work in a letter by Archbishop Hypatius of Ephesus. Writing to Julian of Atrimitius, one of his subordinate bishops, Hypatius addresses the question of how a bishop should respond to lay devotion to iconography.<sup>40</sup> His response is sophisticated and tremendously important for our purposes. While Hypatius himself has no particular devotion to icons, and seems to regard them as dispensable for the spiritually proficient, his attitude is benign and in fact he rebukes Julian for taking invasive action to prohibit access to icons by simple Christians. Hypatius was prepared to tolerate icons for their educative value — as he puts it, they might lead their viewers "to noetic beauty."<sup>41</sup> As we will have further occasion to note, Hypatius is like Evagrius in setting great store by the perception of the noetic and immaterial light of the Divinity.<sup>42</sup> Hypatius sees no contradiction in venerating icons on the one hand, and perceiving divine light on the other. According to Hypatius, the relationship is not antithetical; rather, it is progressive. Thus, Hypatius teaches Julian that icons can lead the simple faithful to contemplation of the Divine Being while, for his own part, he "takes no delight" in icons.<sup>43</sup> The case of Hypatius

even it [i.e., matter] is a form — the last one; the whole universe is a form and all things in it are forms."

<sup>40</sup> The text is found in Franz Diekamp, *Analecta Patristica*, OCA 117 (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1938) 127-129.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.28.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.29-30. For Evagrius, see, e.g., *Antirheticus* 6.16 (Frankenberp, 524); *cog* 42 (SC 438.296); *orat* 74 (PG 79.1184); *Kephalaia Gnostica* 2.29, 5.15 (PO 28[i].73, 183; "KG"); *Skenmata* 3, 12b [— ps. *Suppl.* 4, 28] (J. Muyltermans, "Evagriana", *Le Muséon* 44 (1931) 51-52; "idem"), ps. *Suppl.* 21, 25 (Frankenberg, 441, 448); *Gnostikos* 45 (SC 356.178; "gnos"). Two important studies on Evagrian light-mysticism are Antoine Guillaumont, "La vision de l'intellect par lui-même dans la mystique Evagrienne", *Mélanges de l'Université Saint-Joseph* 50 (1984) 255-262 [reprinted in his *Études sur la spiritualité de l'Orient chrétien*, Spiritualité Orientale 66 (Bérgrolles en Mauges: Abbaye de Bellefontaine, 1996) 143-150]; and H.-V. Beyer, "Die Lichtlehre der Mönche des vierzehnten und des vierten Jahrhunderts, etnotet am Beispiel des Gregorios Sinaites, des Euagrios Pontikos und des ps.-Makarios/Symeon", *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 31 (1981) 473-512.

<sup>43</sup> Diekamp, 128.2-3.

therefore cautions us against hastily assuming that an active interest in visions of divine light precludes a place for devotion to religious artwork.<sup>44</sup> It also gives us a good instance of the symbolic function of Christian iconography. Much as Plotinus expected the philosopher to be drawn on to contemplating the Supreme by his admiration for beautiful things, Hypatius regards icons as a means for learning and making spiritual progress. In the cases of both Hypatius and Plotinus, then, we see Platonic sensibilities at work, affirming the value of beauty and of representations in the spiritual life. So rejecting icons is not axiomatic for Neoplatonists. With this possibility in mind, let us turn to the alleged "mental iconoclasm" of Evagrian theology.

#### *Evagrius' "iconoclastic" tendencies*

Prof. Clark makes these allegations with gusto and lucidity, and at some length. With commendable straightforwardness, she announces her sympathy for Evagrius and other theological *bêtes noires* from the very start of the study.<sup>45</sup> Embracing the displacement of theology in the study of early Christianity,<sup>46</sup> Clark disavows any attempt to reinterpret, reinvent or rehabilitate Evagrius in terms of theological orthodoxy.<sup>47</sup> Counter to such trends, she asserts that in Evagrian theology the mind is fundamentally opposed to matter and she argues that Evagrius' preoccupation to locate the "Image of God" in the mind fuelled his struggle with the "Anthropomorphites." Her case is based on the incontrovertible evidence that Evagrius understood prayer as the flight of the immaterial to the Immaterial, and consequently resisted material images or even imagination. Clark goes further and argues that Evagrius tended to "allegorize and spiritualize" worship in order, *inter alia*, to abstract Christianity from the flesh.

<sup>44</sup> I suspect the same point could be made regarding Denys; on light, see *De divinis nominibus* 4.2-6 (PTS 33.144-150); on symbols, see fn. 23.

<sup>45</sup> Clark, 10.

<sup>46</sup> See Elizabeth Clark, "The State and Future of Historical Theology: Patristic Studies", in *ead.*, *Ascetic Piety and Women's Faith* (Edwin Mellen: Lewiston, NY, 1986) 3-19, at p. 12.

<sup>47</sup> Indeed, she takes several swipes at another Evagrian scholar precisely for undertaking such a task: see Clark, 44 fn. 4, 152-153, 191 fn. 276.

All of this feeds into her assessment of Evagrius as a thoroughgoing iconoclast.

Along these lines, Clark ascribes to Evagrius the view that "the physical ceremony of the Eucharist is defective: it is linked with the formation of images in the mind."<sup>48</sup> To support her claim, she makes reference to a passage from Evagrius' *On thoughts*, which we will need to consider momentarily and which I translate as follows:

Of concepts, some imprint and shape (*schēmatizei*) our leading principle (*hēgemonikon*), but others present only knowledge without imprinting or shaping the mind. The passage, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God" puts a concept in the heart, but it neither shapes nor imprints; while the passage, "taking bread" shapes the mind, and again the passage, "He broke it" imprints the mind. And the passage, "I saw the Lord seated upon a lofty and sublime throne" imprints the mind — apart from "I saw the Lord." For while the words seem to imprint the mind, the meaning does not imprint the mind: for he [*viz.*, Isaiah] saw with prophetic eye the rational nature elevated by ascetic struggle and, seated on it, the knowledge of God...<sup>49</sup>

Another feature of Evagrius' writings that Clark adduces in support of her thesis is his preference for light as a metaphor of God's presence. This is significant because, unlike images, light is amorphous.<sup>50</sup> There is no reason to be concerned about idolatry,

<sup>48</sup> Clark, 65.

<sup>49</sup> Evagrius, *cog* 41 (SC 438.290)

<sup>50</sup> Clark 70-71, at p. 71: "Whatever the precise resolution of this question concerning the 'light' of God in relation to that of the mind, it is clear that God's 'light' has no form or shape, occupies no space, and is completely immaterial. This teaching thus serves as yet another indication of Evagrius' [sic] insistence on the total 'imagelessness' of the mind at the time of contemplative prayer. Any image we have in our minds exists 'as a god' [*cog* 27 (PG 79.1232) [= *cog* 37 (SC 438.282)] — and hence is basically idolatrous." N.B.: Apropos of *cog* 27/37, Clark writes: "When we image even the face of an enemy at the time of prayer, we make him 'as a god', for what the mind looks at constantly during prayer should rightly be called its god" (p. 71 fn. 176). This paraphrase of the text is unsatisfactory since it leaves out the two critical elements in Evagrius' analysis of the problem: the animosity that one harbours, and the demons who through these fantasies inhibit one's prayer. In other words, Evagrius' point is quite other than Clark makes it out to be; he is not concerned about the image, but about the animosity.

as Clark intimates Evagrius is,<sup>51</sup> if one keeps to light and keeps from images.

This raises a host of interesting problems. Her claims about Evagrius' distaste for liturgical ceremonies provide a convenient place to start.

#### *Sanctified matter in the Eucharist*

Clark claims that the text from *On thoughts*, cited above, demonstrates Evagrius' belief that Eucharistic ceremonial is defective; but it is worth noting here the context from which Evagrius has taken his quotations. He refers to Mt 26:26: "And as they were eating, Jesus, taking bread, blessed it and *He broke it*, and gave it to the disciples and said, 'Take, eat: this is my body.'" We should note that Evagrius cites (in order to call into question) the phrases "taking bread" and "He broke it"; but he has nothing

<sup>51</sup> See Clark, p. 57 at fn. 84. Clark's point about Evagrius' rejection of idolatry is indubitably correct, but she makes a fearful mess of the evidence she cites. It is a Coptic fragment of Evagrius, published by H.-M. Schenke ("Ein koptischer Evagrius", in ed. P. Nagel, *Graeco-Coptica: Griechen und Kopten im byzantinischen Ägypten* [Martin-Luther-Universität: Halle, 1984] 219-234). She appears to have been misled by Schenke's translation; twice he translates  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\lambda\alpha\lambda\alpha\sigma\omega\mu\epsilon\kappa\alpha\iota$ , and once  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\lambda\alpha\lambda\alpha\sigma\omega\mu\epsilon\kappa\alpha\iota$ , as "ein (Götter-)Bild" (p. 219). In English, the cognates "idol" and "icon" will suffice. But we need not agonise over how to render the Coptic, since the fragment is simply a translation of his *De octo spiritibus malitiae* 8 (PG 79.1153B5-9; Schenke notes this on p. 223). From this we see that  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\lambda\alpha\lambda\alpha\sigma\omega\mu\epsilon\kappa\alpha\iota$  goes for *eidōlon* in the first instance, and *kibdēlon* in the second; and that the final  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\lambda\alpha\lambda\alpha\sigma\omega\mu\epsilon\kappa\alpha\iota$  simply a gloss. Since it does not obviously go back to Evagrius,  $\nu\omicron\upsilon\epsilon\lambda\alpha\lambda\alpha\sigma\omega\mu\epsilon\kappa\alpha\iota$  ("icon") can be bracketed. As for the first two, they do not and indeed cannot mean "image of God" in the sense Clark's interpretation requires: they quite simply mean "something that is worshipped in place of God." Apart from the linguistic problem, we should also note that Evagrius is cautioning against *avarice* — not *images* — in this passage, much as he elsewhere talks of anger as an idol (cog 37.24, to which reference is made in the immediately previous footnote). So this passage is no example of Evagian iconoclasm. It must be admitted, however, that there is a tenuous connection between icons and idols — when the icons are illegitimate. Thus, Evagrius writes (cog 25 [SC 438.244.51-56]) that "the demonic thought is the icon of the perceptible man established in the mind (*kata dianoian*), imperfect (*atelēs*), with which the *nous* that moves in an impassioned way says something illegitimately or acts in secret to the successive shaping of an idol of it."

to say about, "He blessed it." This omission is conspicuous, and it indicates that the last clause, unlike the other two, is one that neither "forms" nor "imprints."<sup>52</sup> That, and not some presumptive claim about the Eucharist, is what is significant about Evagrius' reference to Mt 26:26: Christ's blessing is exempt from Evagrius' qualifications because His blessing is God's blessing and actions of God do not compromise the Christian's psychological integrity. Evagrius makes a comparable point in his first scholion on Ps. 140: the thought of God necessarily protects the intellect from being imprinted.<sup>53</sup> So after closer inspection, we can now reasonably interpret the exegetical thrust of Evagrius' remark as affirming, if obliquely, God's blessing of the Eucharistic bread. Consequently, Clark's primary textual evidence in support of the claim that Evagrius rejects the Eucharist on iconoclastic grounds fails to establish her case.

But we can go still further. If the material character of the Eucharist makes it marginally important or even insignificant for Evagrian spirituality, we could expect *a fortiori* that the Incarnation would similarly be marginally important or insignificant. And in fact quite the opposite is true. In his earliest known work, the "Dogmatic Sermon" or *Epistula fidei*, Evagrius even enjoins his readers to imagine the Christ Child in the manger as a device for refuting the heretics!<sup>54</sup> Likewise, the doctrine of the Incarnation provides him with a touchstone of orthodoxy in an anecdote from Palladius' altogether Evagrian *Life of Evagrius*.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>52</sup> About imprinting, see esp. G. Bunge, "La montaigne intelligible", *Studia Monastica* 42 (2000) 7-26, at p. 12 fn. 56.

<sup>53</sup> Evagrius, *scholion* in Ps 140.2a (ed. J.B. Pitru, *Analecta Sacra*, 7 vols. [Paris: Typis Tusculanis, 1876-1891]: 3.348; "in Ps"). For these scholia, see M.-J. Rondeau, "Le commentaire sur les Psaumes d'Évagre le Pontique", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 26 (1960) 307-348. See also *orat* 64 (PG 79.1180).

<sup>54</sup> Evagrius, *Epistula fidei* 4 (ed. J. Gribomont, "Ips-Basil", *Epistula* 8), in ed. M. Forlin-Patrucco, *Basilio di Cesarea, le Lettere*, vol. 1 [Torino: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1983] 84-112, at p. 94; "ep fid"). This striking passage anticipates Theodore's catalogue of events from the Gospels which point to the dual natures of Christ and in which Theodore, of course, finds justification for iconography; see *ep* 380 (fn. 13, above).

<sup>55</sup> Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca* 38.11, *r.l.* (ed. C. Butler, *The Lausiac History of Palladius*, I/II [Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967 (reprint; Cambridge:

Even in his most abstruse and difficult works, the *Gnostic Chapters* and the *Great Letter*, we find several passages in which Evagrius glorifies in the wonder of Christ's Incarnation.<sup>56</sup> This stable feature of his writing is deeply inconsistent with Clark's conclusion that Evagrius was issuing a "call for an 'imageless' Christianity."<sup>57</sup> So the "spiritualized and allegorized" teaching Clark ascribes to Evagrius — which is meant to be not simply non-material, but in fact anti-material<sup>58</sup> — fails to do justice to the complexity of Evagrius' thought. Contrary to the claim that Evagrius felt theological discomfort with matter, and that this led him to "mental iconoclasm," Evagrius is known to have blasted heretics for calumniating against the body, against matter, and against Christ the Creator.<sup>59</sup> (This connection of the body, matter and Christ is characteristic of Evagrius' thought, as we shall see). Moreover, his disciple, Palladius, dramatically relates Evagrius' personal devotion to the Eucharist by telling us that his last act was to receive communion at the feast of Epiphany.<sup>60</sup> Consequently, Clark's suggestion that Evagrius' disdain for matter

Cambridge University Press, 1898, 1904]: 1131-135; "HL". For Evagrius' influence on Palladius, see René Draguet, "L'Histoire Lausique: une œuvre écrite dans l'esprit d'Evagre", *Revue d'Histoire Ecclésiastique* 41 (1946) 321-64 and 42 (1947) 5-49.

<sup>56</sup> E.g., Evagrius, KG 5.48 (PO 28[i].197); *Epistula magna* 57 (ed. G. Vitestan, *Seconde partie du traité qui passe sous le nom de "La grande lettre d'Evagre le Pontique à Mélanie l'Ancienne"* [Lund: Gleerup, 1964] 23; "ep mag", N.B.: For Evagrius' letters, I follow the internal divisions of G. Bunge, *Evagrius Pontikos. Briefe aus der Wüste* [Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1986]); in Pss 98.58, 131.7e (PG 12.1557, 39.1589).

<sup>57</sup> Clark, 66.

<sup>58</sup> Clark, 65-66. I do not deny that Evagrius recognised and used the Eucharist as a symbol. E.g., at *ep fid* 4.16-23 (Gribomont, p. 94). Evagrius uses the image of the Eucharist to describe the Christian life as a whole. See also *Sententiae ad monachos* 118-120 (TU 39[iv].163; "Ad mon"); *Capita paranaetica* 120 (PG 79.1260); *aliae sententiae* 18-19 (PG 40.1269); and *esp. scholia* 13 in Ecclesiastes 2.25 (SC 397.78; "sch in Eccles"). But this in no way proves that Evagrius thought the Eucharist was merely a symbol.

<sup>59</sup> E.g., Evagrius, KG 4.60, 4.62, 4.71, 4.83 (PO 28[i].163, 167, 173); *prae* 53 (SC 171[i].620); *scholia* 215 in Proverbs 20.12 (SC 340.310; "sch in Prov"). He develops his analysis without polemic in *ep mag*; see esp. *ep mag* 38-53 (Vitestan, 11-21).

<sup>60</sup> Palladius, HL 38.13 (ed. G.J.M. Bartelink, *Palladio. La storia lausiaca* [Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1974] 202).

*Christ, the Lion of the Father, in Evagrian Theology*

bolsters his rejection of the Christian liturgy and sacraments is unfounded; so, too, her claim that Evagrius was "the quintessential iconoclast."<sup>61</sup>

*Christ, the original icon, and Christian symbols*

Departing now from Clark's analysis, a stronger case against the alleged iconoclasm of Evagrian theology might begin with the observation that Evagrius was by his own account, and by that of Palladius, a defender of orthodoxy.<sup>62</sup> Of course we cannot therefore hang any orthodox tenet we chose on the peg of Evagrius' self-description; iconography as defended by the later councils simply does not enter into the discussion. And yet Evagrius' self-description is significant for our purposes, because it is realised in his affirmation of doctrinal and dogmatic symbols and his expectation that others affirm them, too. A fine example is found in his *Exhortations to a virgin*, where he insists on the importance of right dogma in principle, and then elaborates on some specific tenets of right dogma.<sup>63</sup> In another case, Evagrius even employs the image of the tripartite human as an analogy for the Holy Trinity.<sup>64</sup> This is tremendously significant: in order to teach his readers about the Trinity, Evagrius applies to God the human image, which is the very last thing he would do if he entertained deep misgivings about the propriety of images. This goes to show that Evagrius was not at all a theologian ill-at-ease with representations, mental or artistic or otherwise. Consequently, his teaching about the formlessness of God ought not be taken to preclude the use of symbols or concepts or images. Now, a central theme of Evagrius' message is ascetic transformation. The practical consequences of this struggle are evident, for instance, in the Christian's ability to make right use of "the things God has given him," whatever these may be.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Clark, 84.

<sup>62</sup> Palladius, HL 38.1 (Bartelink, 192-194); the Coptic version is even more direct on this point: see E. Amélineau, *De Historia Lausiaca* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1887) 114. For Evagrius, see fn. 63, below.

<sup>63</sup> Evagrius, *Ad uirg* 54, r.l. (TU 39[iv].150-151; "Ad uirg"); cf. *Ad mon* 124 (TU 39[iv].163).

<sup>64</sup> Evagrius, *ep mag* 15-16 (Frankenberg, 614).

<sup>65</sup> Evagrius, *skem* 25 [= ps.-Suppl. 16] (Muyldermans, 54).

A memorable passage from his treatise *On wicked thoughts* makes it clear that this has theoretical consequences as well. Here, he talks of avaricious thoughts prompted by seeing gold. Evagrius urges his readers to analyse this situation in order to locate the cause of the sin. He teaches that the sin is not the thought, nor the thinking; instead, it is the inclination of the soul. Then, with a brilliant and significant rhetorical flourish, Evagrius asks, "But is the gold itself the sin? Why, then, was it created?"<sup>66</sup> This shows us clearly that the basic matter that is the ground for this temptation is not evil. Evagrius calls for a transformation of the Christian so that the reactions prompted by any given stimulus are holy, not profane. This transformation allows the spiritual to shine through the physical, to transfigure it. It allows material things to be used in a spiritual way, to be affirmed rather than denied. This is what it means to contemplate reality (*theoria tôn ontôn*) in a Christian way.

Progress along this difficult path of transformation leads the ascetic to imageless prayer. This is the goal of the Christian life. But we must be careful not to conflate the goal with the way. Images can promote the attainment of this goal. Images certainly can be used to describe this goal — as when Evagrius describes the summit of this spiritual development as the "vision of God."<sup>67</sup> But images, and indeed everything else, are incomparably inferior to the Holy Trinity.<sup>68</sup> All of these things must be left behind. As Evagrius puts it,

to those entering into the intelligible Church and marvelling at the contemplation of created things, the Word says, "Think not that this is the final end held out to you by the Gospel tidings; for all that is 'vanity of vanities' before the knowledge of God Himself. Just as medicine is vain after perfect health is restored, likewise the reasons of the ages and worlds are vain after the knowledge of the Holy Trinity."<sup>69</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Evagrius, *cog* 19 (SC 438.218.13-14). Note the parallel in Maximus the Confessor, *Four Centuries on Charity* 2.84 (*Philokalia tôn Ierôn Nēptikon*, 5 vols. (Athens: Astér, 1957-1963, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.): 2.25; "Φ").

<sup>67</sup> E.g., Evagrius, *orat* 114 (PG 79.1192); *KG* 5.26 (PO 28[i].187); cf. the saying attributed to Evagrius in the Coptic *Life* (Amélineau, 118): "One who is impure will not see the Lord."

<sup>68</sup> Evagrius, *Ad mon* 110 (TU 39[jv].162).

<sup>69</sup> Evagrius, *sch* 2 in *Ecll* 1.2 (SC 397.59-60); I take *logos* to refer to the *Logos* - pace P. Géhin (SC 397.61, note *ad loc.*).

We should clarify Evagrius' motivation for requiring images to be left behind. It is certainly not because images are mendacious, or matter is hateful, that he does so.<sup>70</sup> Instead, it is because the pinnacle of spiritual progress is the communion of the immaterial mind with its immaterial God.<sup>71</sup> This communion occurs during pure prayer, when the praying Christian, divested of all concepts and passions, is infused with the light of the Holy Trinity.<sup>72</sup> Because of the intimacy of this encounter, it is notoriously difficult to distinguish the natural light of the mind from the light of God.<sup>73</sup> But the distinction might not be of particular importance; Evagrius was not certain of the question himself.<sup>74</sup> It is the relation that matters. God is light and the Glory of God illuminates the temple of the mind.<sup>75</sup> Nothing should interfere in the process of this illumination. But, as we have already insisted — and as the case of Hypatius decisively proves — this is the culmination of a process that involves the right use of images. We have just learned from Evagrius that the Logos plays an important role in bringing the mind to this communion with the Trinity. How this takes place, brings us to the central theme of this paper.

In his scholia to the Psalms, Evagrius talks of Christ as the "icon" of the Father and the "face" of the Father.<sup>76</sup> Commencing

<sup>70</sup> Evagrius castigates those who malign creation, because by implication they insult the Creator; see fn. 59, above. These passages must be taken seriously. See further J.G. Bunge, "Origenismus-Gnosticismus", *Vigiliae Christianae* 40 (1986) 24-54.

<sup>71</sup> This point is excellently made by Jeremy Driscoll, *The "Ad Monachos" of Evagrius Ponticus*, *Studia Anselmiana* 104 (Rome: Benedictina Edizioni Abbazia S. Paolo, 1991) 297-306.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Evagrius, *skem* 1, 3, 12a, 17 [= *ps.-Suppl.* 2, 4, 26, 39 & 30], 56 (Muyldermans, 51-53, 56).

<sup>73</sup> See fn. 42, above.

<sup>74</sup> See Evagrius, *Antirrhētikos* 6.16 (Frankenberg, 524-525).

<sup>75</sup> God is light: see *KG* 1.35 (PO 28[i].33); "The mind is the temple of the Holy Trinity", *skem* 13 [= *ps.-Suppl.* 37] (Muyldermans, 53).

<sup>76</sup> Evagrius, in *Pss* 16.2a, 79.88 (PG 12.1217, 1544). Evagrius also teaches that we are renewed "according to the icon of the Creator" (*cog* 3 (SC 438.160.31-162.40) and that the *nous* is the "icon of God" (*cog* 19 (SC 438.218.10-11). Note also that humans are the icons of God the prototype, and this relationship should motivate us to act lovingly toward our fellow man; *prak* 89 (SC 171[ii].686.13-15).



on Ps 79.8b ("And show your face and we shall be saved"), Evagrius writes, "Here he calls Christ, 'the face' — 'for He is the icon of the unseen God, the firstborn of all creation.'" <sup>77</sup> Evagrius significantly links this interpretation of the Father's face with the claim that the angels long to look upon the face of the Father (Mt 18:10). For example, commenting on Ps 118.135 ("Make your face shine upon your servant, and teach me your precepts"), Evagrius writes, "This is the face that the angels ever behold — the Father's, Who is in heaven. This clearly signifies that the contemplation of precepts is appropriate to angelic knowledge." <sup>78</sup> Since the angels long to look upon the face of the Father; and since Christ, who by definition has a body, <sup>79</sup> is the face of the Father; what the angels want to see is nothing other than the Incarnation. Once more, we see the importance Evagrius ascribes to the Incarnation. In this way, Christ plays a central role in the contemplation of God. This is a continuation of the Logos' role as the Father's mediator with respect to creation. <sup>80</sup> And so the contemplation of the Universe is decidedly Christocentric. As a passage in the Syriac *Evagriana* puts it, "The intelligible perception of Christ has manifested to us the mystery of the perceiving of everything." <sup>81</sup> This is not surprising: Evagrius considers Christ the incarnate creator and organiser of the world. As Christ, the Logos Himself participates in the creation, to save it. His dual role as creator and saviour precludes any categorical rejection of matter on Evagrius' part. Accordingly, contemplation of the created order is an important element of the spiritual life according to Evagrius. <sup>82</sup> The order of creation, evident in the

<sup>77</sup> Evagrius, in *Ps* 79.88; cf. 16.2a (PG 12.1544; 12.1217).

<sup>78</sup> Evagrius, in *Ps* 118.135va (Pitra, 3.300); for the angels beholding the Father's face, cf. in *Pss* 4.70 (Pitra, 2.453-454), 12.1a, 23.6x, 29.80, 104.4x (PG 12.1204, 1268, 1296, 1564).

<sup>79</sup> Cf. Evagrius, *KG* 6.14 (PO 28[i].223).

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Evagrius, *ep fid* 3.39 (Gribomont, 92).

<sup>81</sup> Evagrius, *Admonitio paraenetica* 7 (ed. J. Muyldermans, *Evagriana Syriaca* [Leuven: Publications universitaires, 1952] 127); this text is classified in the *CPG* among the "dubia et spuria" without comment; but even if in fact Evagrius himself did not pen it, the quotation elegantly summarises the Evagrian teaching that is being presented here.

<sup>82</sup> Evagrius, in *Ps* 89.40 (Pitra, 3.167); cf. in *Pss* 29.80, 35.10e-5 (PG 12.1296, 1316).

*logoi*, is a reflection of Christ who is the Logos of God. <sup>83</sup> On this basis, Evagrius claims that "in the contemplation of creation, we see Christ"; and that "in the knowledge of Christ, we see God." <sup>84</sup> He draws out the ethical and mystical implications of that belief as follows: "The virtues we pursue on account of the *logoi* of what has come into existence; and those, on account of the *Logos* Who truly exists and makes them exist, Who is accustomed to reveal Himself in the state of prayer." <sup>85</sup> In short, Christ is the embodied principle of the order of the Universe and it is Christ who, as an icon, represents the Father to the Universe. One would be hard pressed to find a surer Christian foundation for affirming matter and the capacity of matter to represent things divine.

But this leaves us in a lurch. On the one hand, Evagrius' strictures against material imagination are famous. On the other, we have now culled a great deal of evidence for Evagrius' application of images and use of symbols. We have already noted problems in the interpretations needed to make Evagrius into an opponent of matter and an iconoclast; and now we have considered passages where Evagrius writes warmly about the potential of matter for representation. So iconoclasm simply will not do as the hermeneutic key to Evagrian theology. The theological importance (to say nothing of the sheer number) of the other passages motivates us to seek out a more satisfactory way of characterising Evagrius' thought. The way ahead I would like to suggest is taking Evagrius not as the caricature of heresiologists' pen-portraits, but rather as the forerunner to classical Byzantine theology.

<sup>83</sup> Evagrius, *KG* 2.2, 3.26 (PO 28[i].61, 107); see also G. Bunge, "La montaigne intelligible", *Studia Monastica* 42 (2000) 7-26. St. Maximus the Confessor propounded a very similar (and perhaps more radical) doctrine; cf. *Amibiquum* 7 (PG 91.1081).

<sup>84</sup> Evagrius, 35.10e-5 (PG 12.1316); cf. 14.1a (PG 12.1208).

<sup>85</sup> Evagrius, *orat* 51 (PG 79.1178). Two comments about my translations should be made: firstly, I depart from Migne's *ton ousiosanta Kyrtion*, preferring in its place the reading attested by the Philokalia, by Bibl. Nat. Coislin 109, by Bibl. Nat. gr. 873 and by Vat. gr. 451 (*ton ousiosanta Logon*); and secondly, at the risk of over-translating, I rendered *ousiosanta* in two phrases to make the resonance of the term more obvious than a single phrase in English would do.

### *Currents of interpreting the Evagrian tradition*

That decision raises the question of how we read Evagrius. A word should be said about the frames of reference available for interpreting him. There are currently two dominant frameworks, which are nicely captured in the works of two eminent scholars of Evagrius: Antoine Guillaumont<sup>86</sup> and Fr. Gabriel Bunge.<sup>87</sup> To risk a generality that is not entirely satisfactory, their methods can be distinguished as follows: our criteria can be external and can be based upon the condemnations of Origenism (as with Guillaumont, Refoulé, and others); or they can be internal and can be based upon an attempt at finding consistency within Evagrius' writings (as with Bunge and others).

Let us note at once that it is not necessary to attempt a full-scale rehabilitation of Evagrius in order to follow Bunge; and it is not necessary to telescope Evagrian theology into sixth century Origenism to follow Guillaumont. And certainly we must acknowledge with Guillaumont that the condemned beliefs sprang from interpretations of Evagrian theology. Yet we should be aware that there is an important difference between showing that the condemnations look back to the *Kephalaia Gnostica* and establishing that the condemnations provide the best interpretation of Evagrius. François Refoulé's study of Evagrian Christology is a notable example of how easy it is to overlook that distinction.<sup>88</sup> But why should the excesses of sixth century

<sup>86</sup> A. Guillaumont, "Évagre et les anathémismes antiorigénistes de 553", *Studia Patristica* 3 [= TU 78] (1961) 219-226; and id., *Les "Kephalaia Gnostica" d'Évagre le Pontique*, Patristica Sorbonensia 5 (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1962). In the former, Prof. Guillaumont answers the question, "D'où vient donc cette christologie singulière?" (p. 221), by concluding, "Il ne fait donc aucun doute que la christologie résumée et condamnée dans les 15 anathématismes des 552 n'est autre que celle d'Évagre" (p. 225; emphasis mine). But there is a tremendous difference between identifying the source, and establishing the validity of what Guillaumont rightly calls a *résumé*.

<sup>87</sup> E.g., G. Bunge, "La *ἰνάζει* *ἡμετέροι* di Evagrio Pontico", in ed. P. Bettolo, *L'Epistola fidei di Evagrio Pontico: Temi, contesti, sviluppi*, Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum 72 (Rome: Augustinianum, 2000) 153-181, at 155 and 160 fn. 45. Obviously, I am very sympathetic to Fr. Bunge's work.

<sup>88</sup> It is extremely disquieting that Refoulé reminds his reader of Evagrius' esoteric tendencies, only to fill in what we (the *exoterikoi*) do not know by relying on later condemnations. See his "La christologie d'Évagre et

Palestinian Origenists, about whom we know practically nothing in any case,<sup>89</sup> be taken as the norm for interpreting Evagrius?

I would propose a *sed contra* against those who take the heretical interpreters of Evagrius as his legitimate successors: another line of interpreters is readily available in the *Philokalia*.<sup>90</sup> The *Philokalia* is a ready-made canon. It offers us an external set of criteria for identifying some important aspects of Evagrian theology that are easily overlooked by scholars who are intent on heresy (whether they would repudiate that category, or not). Resorting to the *Philokalia* for interpreting Evagrius is further justified because many of his works were included in it. Furthermore, several modern scholars have already undertaken work along these lines, by investigating Evagrius' influence on writings that appear in the *Philokalia*.<sup>91</sup>

[l'Origenisme", *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 27 (1961) 221-266, at pp. 240 (esp. 240 fn. 2) and 249-250. One is reminded of Paul Koetschau supplying lacunae in his reconstruction of Origen's *De principiis* in order to leave room for inserting passages from Justinian, Jerome and others; see, e.g., *De principiis* 2.10.3 (GCS 22.176, notes to line 20; Koetschau provides a rationale for his decision in the introduction: pp. CXXVIII-CXXXIX). In their edition of Rufinus' translation of *De principiis*, H. Crouzel and M. Simonetti have rightly criticised him for this practice (SC 252.22-33, esp. pp. 32-33).

<sup>89</sup> Cf. Daniel Hombergen, *The Second Origenist Controversy*, Studia Anselmiana 132 (Rome: Centro Studi S. Anselmo, 2001). In the wake of Fr. Hombergen's work, any account of Evagrian theology founded upon the sixth century condemnations of Origenism must be regarded as highly suspect.

<sup>90</sup> See, e.g., Kallistos Ware, "Possiamo parlare di spiritualità della Filocalia?", in T. Špidlik et al., *Amore del Bello. Studi sulla Filocalia* (Magnano: Edizioni Oqaion, 1991) 25-52, at 43; Emmanuel Lanne, "Cassiano il Romano, discepolo di Evagrio Pontico. Un vincolo tra monachismo d'Oriente e d'Occidente", in *ibid.*, 53-77, at 56-64; Gabriel Bunge, "Pričez sans cesse", *Studia Monastica* 30 (1988) 7-16. Cf. E. Peterson, "Zu griechischen Asketikern, III. Zu Evagrius", *Byzantinisch-Neugriechische Jahrbücher* 9 (1931-1932) 45-54, at 51-54; Claire Guillaumont's introduction on the indirect evidence for *prak* (SC 171[1].304-317) and *cog* (SC 438.82-84); and J.A. McCuckin, *Standing in God's Holy Fire* (London: DLT, 2001), 37-54.

<sup>91</sup> E.g., H.-V. Beyer, "Die Lichtlehre der Mönche des vierzehnten und des vierten Jahrhunderts, erörtert am Beispiel des Gregorios Sinaites, des Evagrius Pontikos und des ps.-Makarios/Symeon", *Jahrbuch der österreichischen Byzantinistik* 31 (1981) 473-512; J. Gouillard, "Supercherics et méprises littéraires: l'œuvre de saint Théodore d'Édesse", *Revue des études byzantines* 5 (1947) 137-157 esp. 143-156; M. Viller, "Aux sources de la spiritualité de

One trend, however, that we would do well to avoid is assuming that the fathers of the *Philokalia* are *correcting* Evagrius.<sup>92</sup> To put things that way is to foster the presumption that Evagrius stands in need of correction; in other words, that Evagrius' works are tainted from the start, and that the condemnations portray Evagianism in the rough. That is not self-evidently true. Regardless of what Maximus and company may have thought they were doing, whatever their stated position with respect to Evagrius, the orthodox no less than the heretics engaged briskly in interpreting Evagrius' works. Since much has been written about how heretics interpreted Evagrius, the rest of this essay will sketch the lineaments of an orthodox interpretation of him that accounts for both the negative and the affirmative trends in Evagian theology.

#### *Apophasis and imagery in the Philokalic fathers*

For our purposes, the most salient feature of the Philokalic tradition is its simultaneous affirmation of both denial (*apophasis*) and affirmation (*kataphasis*) in theology. Apophasis is a way of acknowledging that the essence of God, and the activities in which that essence is active, are beyond human categories; while kataphasis is a way of acknowledging that, because God has dwelt among us, we can meaningfully talk about God. One of the pre-eminent spokesmen of that tradition gives this account of how they are related: "Apophatic theology does not contradict or deny kataphatic [theology], but it shows that although statements made kataphatically about God are true and reverent with respect to God, yet they do not apply to God as they apply to us. [...] We, however, embrace both modes of theology, since one does not exclude the other; indeed, by means of each we confirm ourselves in a reverent way of thought."<sup>93</sup> Thus, according to St. Gregory

S. Maxime, *Les œuvres d'Evagre le Pontique*, *Revue d'Ascétique et de Mystique* 11 (1930) 156-184, 239-268, 331-336.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. I.H. Dalmais, "L'héritage évagrien dans la synthèse de saint Maxime le Confesseur", *Studia Patristica* 8 [TU 93] 356-362; A. Louth, *Maximus the Confessor* (London: Routledge, 1996) 37-38.

<sup>93</sup> Gregory Palamas, *Topics of Natural and Theological Science* 123 (Φ 4.177-178; "Topics"), I am profoundly indebted to the English translation of the *Philokalia* (*The Philokalia: The Complete Text* [London: Faber, 1979]-).

Palamas, apophasis and kataphasis qualify one another and in doing so promote our understanding of God; they are, in a word, complementary. Evidence of this complementary relationship is found in the way that these theologians, who are keenly interested in maintaining the radical incommunicability of the Godhead, are nonetheless easily able to affirm many different sorts of images. This is similar to what we have noted so far in Evagrius' works. On the one hand, the Philokalic fathers famously write at length about the divine light, an energy of the ineffable Godhead which, like the Godhead, is immaterial and formless.<sup>94</sup> And, on the other hand, they constantly have recourse to symbols and images and metaphors in order to propound their teachings. More to the point, they refer to iconography as a metaphor of the Christian life, and in passing remarks note with approval the place of icons in the Christian life.

For instance, Diadochus describes the role of the Holy Spirit in the spiritual life as that of a painter who paints the divine image within us.<sup>95</sup> Peter Darnascene also employs that charming metaphor, and he takes it for granted that icons work miracles and should be shown respect.<sup>96</sup> Palamas makes iconography a cornerstone of Christological orthodoxy.<sup>97</sup> Diadochus and Gregory of Sinai are even bolder: they claim that God can provide thoughts and images.<sup>98</sup> In keeping with the teaching long since put forth by Evagrius, Gregory of Sinai and Gregory Palamas teach that the purification of the body (through asceticism) and of the mind (through prayer) allows Christians to see icons, and

"ET"), and have used it as a basis for my quotations and for the titles of its contents. I therefore include references to that translation as well (for current quotation, ET 4.404).

<sup>94</sup> Cf. Gregory of Sinai, *On Commandments and Doctrines* 116, 131; *On the Signs of Grace and Delusion* 3 (Φ 4.52, 60-61, 67-68; ET 4.239, 248-250; "Commandments", "Grace").

<sup>95</sup> Diadochus, *On spiritual knowledge* 89 (Φ 1.265-266; ET 1.288; "Knowledge").

<sup>96</sup> Peter Darnascene, *Treasury* 1 *ad fin.* (cf. Evagrius, *gnos* 50 [SC 356.192]) and 2.6 (Φ 3.111.1-6, 125.39-40; ET 3.210, 226).

<sup>97</sup> Palamas, *New Testament Decalogue* 2 (Φ 4.117-17.21; ET 4.324-325).  
<sup>98</sup> Diadochus, *Knowledge* 26; Gregory of Sinai, *Commandments* 23 (Φ 1.241-242, 4.38; ET 1.259-260, 4.216-217); cf. Evagrius, *orai* 64 (PG 79.1180).

indeed the whole of creation, with renewed eyes. The Sinaite expresses the matter with admirable clarity: "... a philosopher is first and foremost a mind conversant equally with ascetic practice and contemplative wisdom, [...] distinguishing the perceptible world that is being seen from the one that is not perceptible or seen, since what is seen is an image of what is unseen, and what is unseen is the archetype of what is being seen."<sup>99</sup> Palamas is equally articulate: "For love of Him Who became man for our sakes, you shall make an icon, and through His icon you should remember and worship Him, elevating your intellect through it to that venerable body of the Saviour which is sitting at the right of the Father in heaven."<sup>100</sup> This movement from the which is seen to that which is unseen, culminating in the encounter with God, is by now deeply familiar to us. What we have seen in seminal form in Hypatius' letter is thus fully developed by these later authors: Hypatius acknowledged that images can lead to seeing the divine light, that is, to encountering God; the later authors indicate how the spiritual life is directed by images and their interpretation and culminates in the vision of the divine light.

The divine light is of enormous importance in the Philokalic tradition, because it is an energy of God that relates God to creatures. The energies, or actions, of God touch upon both the apophatic and the kataphatic domains of theology.<sup>101</sup> The energies are characteristic of the divine essence, so God is present in them and we are able to experience God through them.<sup>102</sup> This experience notwithstanding, humans are not able to participate in the divine essence, which remains unknown to us.<sup>103</sup> Now the controversy about the Athonite hesychasts — a controversy central to Palamas' works — turned on their affirmation that, *while at prayer*, they experienced the divine energies and

<sup>99</sup> Gregory of Sinai, *Commandments* 127 and cf. 23 (Φ 4.57-58 and 34; ET 4.245-246 and 4.216-217); cf. Evagrius, *ep. mag.* 12 (Frankenberg, 614).  
<sup>100</sup> Palamas, *New Testament Decalogue* 2 (Φ 4.117.17-21; ET 4.324); on the "venerable body of the Saviour" in Evagrius, see esp. *KG* 5.48 (PO 28[1], 197) and in *Pss* 98.5β, 131.7ε (PG 12.1557, 39.1589).

<sup>101</sup> Cf. Gregory Palamas, *Topics* 144 (Φ 4.184-185; ET 4.413-414).

<sup>102</sup> E.g., *ibid.* 72, 136 (Φ 4.160, 182-183; ET 4.379, 411).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* 145 (Φ 4.185; ET 4.414).

especially the divine light and were thus in immediate contact with God.<sup>104</sup> Because they claimed to enjoy this mysterious experience while prayer, we can appreciate how prayer could be considered an appropriate domain for apophysis: at prayer, we experience the actions and thus become convinced of the reality of the transcendent essence of God.<sup>105</sup> One is tempted to speak of "apophatic prayer."<sup>106</sup> The application of negative theology to prayer is particularly evident in their prohibitions against images, thoughts and fantasies while praying.<sup>107</sup> It would be impossible, and indeed blasphemous, to make for oneself an image of the essence of God while praying. Once more, the Evagrian resonance is obvious. And that suggests that the comparable interdictions found in Evagrius' accounts of prayer can fruitfully be read as similar attempts to safeguard the dignity of the divine essence.

A trend emerges from these passages: imagelessness is appropriate to the apophatic mode of theology and to prayer; iconography is appropriate to the kataphatic mode and to teaching. This admittedly obvious observation is, I submit, a

<sup>104</sup> This is summarised in the *Hagiortitic Tome* (Φ 4.188-193; ET 4.418-425).

<sup>105</sup> Cf. Palamas, *Topics* 141 (Φ 4.184; ET 4.412): "The energy is not known from the essence; but from the energy it is known that the essence exists, though not what it is. Thus God is known to exist from His providence, not from His essence, according to the Theologians; and the energy can be distinguished from essence as follows: what makes known, is the energy, and that which is thereby known to exist, is the essence."

<sup>106</sup> To my knowledge, prayer as such is not described by the fathers as apophatic — only theology is; see G.W.H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1961) 219.

<sup>107</sup> E.g., Diadochus, *Knowledge* 38, 40, 59, 68, cf. 75, 100 (Φ 1.245-246, 251, 255; 258, 272-273; ET 1.264-265, 270-271, 275-276, 279-295); Maximus the Confessor, *Four Centuries on Love* 1.88, 2.1-5, 2.61, 3.49, 4.42 (2.12, 14, 22, 33, 45; ET 2.63, 69, 76, 90, 105); Abba Philemon, *Discourse* (2.250.8-89; ET 2.354-355); Elias the Presbyter, *Gnostic Anthology* 2.80, 82, 84, 89, 92-93, 99, 104 (2.296-298; ET 3.43-45); Peter Damascene, *Treasury*, introduction, 2.9, 2.10 (3.11.13-29, 3.132-138; ET 3.81-82, 235-236, 242); Theoleptus of Philadelphia, *On inner work in Christ and Texts* 1-2, 5 (4.7.27-39, 4.13.14; ET 4.181, 188-190); Nicephorus the Hesychast, *On watchfulness*: "From Nicephorus himself" (4.26-28; ET 4.206); Gregory of Sinai, *Commandments* 1.71, 116, 118; *Grace* 3; *On stillness* 9; *On prayer* 7 (4.40-41, 52-53, 67, 74-76; ET 4.224, 239, 259, 269, 281-286); cf. Theodore the Great Ascetic, *Century of Spiritual Texts* 70 (1.316-317; ET 2.29).

useful heuristic in reading the works of the Byzantine saints. To transfer this finding to our discussion of Evagrius, imagelessness is appropriate to instances of direct encounter with God; images are appropriate for direction to that end.

### *Evagrius the Philokalic father*

This distinction provides a way of evading the *reductio ad absurdum* into which Evagrianism falls, according to Prof. Clark's analysis. She writes:

Thus does *apatheia* guide the monk to the highest state available to humans in this corporeal world: the intense and formless contemplation of the Godhead that suggests no images to the mind and renders it one with the Divine. Representation has been vanished. The words framed by W.J.T. Mitchell to summarize the development of an iconoclastic rhetoric that repudiates "false images" while attempting to locate "true" ones can be applied to no one better than Evagrius....<sup>108</sup>

In her footnote, Clark remarks upon the "futility" of such undertakings. But on the basis of the foregoing analysis, we can argue that the absurdity of the conclusion does not indicate the bankruptcy, inconsistency or hypocrisy of Evagrius' theology. Instead, it shows that Clark's analysis is fundamentally flawed — precisely because she made iconoclasm the measure of Evagrius' thought. Because we find nascent forms of both *apophasis* and *kataphasis* in Evagrius' theology, imagelessness is an unhelpful paradigm. It fails to account for the affirmation of images, symbols and language, which are also characteristic of Evagrius' writings; but far more importantly, it prevents us from adequately coming to terms with the central role of Christ, the incarnate Logos, in Evagrius' teaching.

There is in fact no reason to attribute to Evagrius an aggressive interest in depriving the human mind of images. What motivates Evagrius to teach that images must be transcended is his conviction that God is immaterial and that it is in the immaterial mind that humans contact God — both unexceptional

<sup>108</sup> Clark, 84; she cites W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text and Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986) 165; I have not been able to consult this work.

claims for a Greek theologian. He demonstrates clearly that right doctrine, including pedagogical images and metaphors (and, for later Christians, artistic depictions), prepares the Christian to encounter the Holy Trinity. Since the preparation is not an end unto itself, Evagrius very reasonably calls upon us to move beyond the symbols to that which they symbolise, as did Hypatius. But this in no way implies a denigration of the symbols, which in the Evagrian scheme are attributable to the providential care of God himself and are to that extent sacred. There is no contradiction between affirming both the responsible use of images and the paramount importance of encountering God in immaterial prayer.

To recapitulate my conclusions, Evagrius does not scorn matter; he is not ashamed of the Incarnation or of the Sacraments; there is no basis for attributing to him iconoclastic tendencies; and in fact even metaphorically attributing such tendencies to him is unjustifiably misleading. For we have seen that he believes that matter is the platform for ascetic practice; that material order is a worthy topic for prayerful contemplation; and that matter admits of being illuminated by God so that it becomes useful for spiritual progress. This capacity of matter is explicable at least in part with reference to the Logos' work in creation, which was preparatory for the Logos' work in Incarnation. All of these facets of Evagrius' theology are obscured if we interpret his qualifications of matter as being somehow founded on an anti-material disposition. Quite the opposite, his beliefs about Christ, symbols, and matter are the fertile ground in which later statements of iconophilic theology took root and flourished.

Finally, we have seen that Evagrius can be meaningfully compared to the Philokalic fathers and that their writings can provide helpful cues for interpreting Evagrius. I would venture to suggest that his place amongst them is not limited to apposite observations and lapidary exhortations about ascetic practice. The influence he had upon them upon them has implications, some of which I have sketched only too lightly, for his theology as well. For instance, their well-developed distinction of *apophasis* from *kataphasis* provides a schema that can assist us in the complex task of sympathetically reconstructing Evagrius' theology from the wreckage of the centuries. If the tradition of the